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ABSTRACT

The potential contribution of mentoring to educationally disadvantaged students was examined at Brooklyn College. The students were part of a program called "SEEK," which admits low income students regardless of their high school grades and which provides counseling, tutoring, and remediation. A major goal of the mentoring project was to learn more about the needs of these students for tutoring/mentoring both in developmental freshman coursework and in their core curriculum coursework. Students' performance and attitudes were compared for six classes that had a mentor and six classes that did not. Mentors' primary responsibilities were to encourage the participation of students and to be available as role models and homework helpers for about 5 hours per week. Pre- and post-course assessment was undertaken using the Brown/Holtzman Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes, Form 6; and the Daly/Miller Checklist on Student Writing Apprehension. End-of-course questionnaires on student needs and on the help provided by mentors were also completed. Areas that students needed help included: outlining and writing papers, and using primary and secondary sources for papers. Additional findings are provided, along with an explanation of the role of student mentors as distinguished from that of tutors and instructors. (SW)

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INTERACTIVE STUDENT LEARNING: AN INTERIM REPORT ON A MENTORING PROJECT

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Problem

National studies of attrition among the general population of college students are very firm in their conclusions about the heavy contribution of weak academic performance to college withdrawal (e.g., Beal and Noel, 1980; Ramist, 1981). One would of course expect the phenomenon to be more pronounced among underprepared students. The myriad sets of data gathered on SEEK[1] students who enter Brooklyn College as freshmen show that the majority do not persist long and also show that the majority leave with a low grade point average. One must inevitably conclude that weak academic performance plays a very important role in their heavy attrition.

Whereas college attrition as a function of poor fit between institution and students in general has recently been quite extensively investigated, attrition among disadvantaged students in particular has received inadequate formal study (Tinto, 1982). One notable exception is the work of Fox, who applied Tinto's model of college withdrawal to SEEK students at a senior branch of CUNY (Fox, 1985). He found that "academic integration was the most salient aspect of development for this group of students" (p. 2). Further, just one of his diverse measures of social integration was found to bear a significant correlation with persistence: extent and quality of peer relationships (as defined by Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980).[2]

Mentoring[3] unites these two important factors of academic integration

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[1]SEEK students are students from poverty backgrounds admitted irrespective of their high school grades and carrying supplementary funding from the State for counseling, tutoring, remediation, etc.

[2]By contrast, there were no significant correlations between student persistence and the quality of non-classroom interactions with faculty or the frequency of non-classroom contacts with faculty for personal reasons or the number of contacts with departmental counselors for personal reasons.

[3]For definition of mentoring, see Appendix.

and social integration with peers. Not only does it directly support student progress in coursework, it also offers an exceptionally supportive kind of social integration by developing relationships between mentor and student and among the students themselves under the guidance of the mentor. In addition, the mentor often serves as an agent, introducing the students to other people and other resources at the College.

The evidence on the importance of improving academic integration is abundant. One good example is the work of Abrams and Jernigan (1984), who have recently demonstrated the effectiveness of support services for high risk college students with respect to time spent using support services and frequency of contacts with tutors. The extra components of mentoring that make it a more intensely personal process than tutoring can reasonably be expected to strengthen such findings. Also, the literature shows that peer tutors effect study skills change in freshmen as well as professional teachers do (Fremouw and Feindler, 1978).

It is worth noting that according to the critical review of the literature on mentoring carried out by Merriam (1983), there have been no adequate studies on the effectiveness of mentoring for students. The potential importance of mentoring for SEEK students makes this an especially lamentable lack.

Background

At this point it should be useful to look at how this mentoring project began. I teach non-traditional students in a quite traditional college. More specifically, I teach remedial reading and sometimes writing to minority students from weak high schools in impoverished neighborhoods. Most of my students are freshmen who have failed the City University of New York basic skills assessment tests in reading and writing and mathematics.

Semester after semester I saw that for these students there was an enormous distance between the skill with which they used formal lanaguage when they entered the course and the skill with which they needed to use it as fully functioning advanced college students. Their difficulty seemed to stem in large part from what Goody and Watt term "the gap between the public literate tradition of the school and the very different and indeed often directly contradictory private oral traditions of the pupil's family and peer group."[1] The gap was clear to any observer; it was clear to me; most importantly it was clear to the students. As the students saw it, they needed to be in control of standard English in the manner of their textbook writers, in the manner of their college professors: mastery of formal discourse seemed necessary for moving effectively through the college curriculum. The difference between their reading and writing and the requisite reading and writing could seem discouragingly great.

Hence the idea of providing a mentor for them. For the mentor and the mentor's language usage have sometimes been in such a predicament too; but the mentor and the mentor's language have generally moved beyond this situation to substantial mastery of formal discourse. I first tried providing a mentor while I was teaching developmental writing in an intensive summer program. A year earlier I had taught a promising freshman whose hard work and intellectual development were exemplary. After his sophomore year he came to my summer writing class as a mentor. It seemed to be his commonality of experience with the students that helped give him a unique role: he was an intermediary between the students and myself; more importantly he was an intermediary between the students and their academic goals. He helped the students focus on their growth in mastering the writing process, recalling how he had grown in mastering the writing process.

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[1] J. Goody and I Watt. "The Consequences of Literacy," Comparative Studies in Society and History, 5 (1962) 304-345, quoted in Geraldin Joncich Clifford, "Buch und Lesen: Historical Perspectives on Literacy and Schooling," Review of Educational Research, 54, (Winter, 1984), 472.

The dissimilarity between what the students wrote and what they wished to write began to seem smaller; and it began to be smaller.

This work seemed quite successful for all of us. For the students: their attendance was almost perfect, and most of them passed the City University of New York Writing Assessment Test at the end of the course, whereas before the course they had repeatedly failed it. For the mentor: he went on with this kind of work, majored in psychology and became assistant coordinator of a skills center at another college, pursuing a graduate degree at the same time. For me: this was step one of an expanding project, for there seemed to be considerable need for mentors beyond my own classroom.

A survey I conducted in June, 1984, among college-wide faculty attending an annual Faculty Development Seminar showed that the most frequently identified student needs were the following: completing homework successfully; note-taking on lectures; understanding texts; note-taking on texts; reviewing for exams. Also, faculty members from classics, art, music, political science, sociology, history, English, mathematics, computer science, biology, chemistry, and modern languages agreed that student mentors could be of great use in improving the quality of student work in their courses. The areas in which the overwhelming majority of respondents thought mentors could be of most use were the following: reviewing assigned readings; clarifying student understanding of writing assignments; guiding students in revision of papers; holding tutoring sessions.

Encouraged both by my own pilot work and by this informal needs assessment, I sought and obtained funding to begin on an experimental basis the mentoring project described here.

Project

For the SEEK-funded Research Grants of January, 1985, I proposed

to implement and evaluate mentoring among SEEK students at Brooklyn College. With a view to stemming the attrition, a major goal of this project was to learn more about the needs of these students for tutoring/mentoring both in developmental freshman coursework and in their Core Curriculum[1] coursework. The design in my proposal called for finding six suitable classes with several SEEK students enrolled. The plan was to designate three experimental groups (provide a mentor) and where possible to have quasi-control groups (provide no mentor). Both groups of students were to be evaluated on performance and attitude based on the one-semester intervention. It was projected initially that a follow-up proposal regarding attrition would be made subsequently.

As proposed, the work was carried out both in Core classes having an adequate enrollment of SEEK students and in Developmental Writing classes consisting wholly of SEEK students. In all cases the support of the relevant chairperson was first obtained, and then the consent of the potential participating faculty members, and then the consent of the potential participating SEEK students in keeping with the guidelines of the Committee on Human Subjects. In this way 12 classes were identified: 6 classes in Core 1, Classical Origins of Western Culture; 2 classes in Core 4, The Shaping of the Modern World; 4 classes in Freshman Developmental Writing. A random assignment of half the classes to experimental status and half to control status was then made for each of the three courses, yielding 6 experimental classes and 6 control classes. A mentor was provided for each of the experimental classes and no mentor was provided for the control classes.

The selection of mentors was conducted by the principal investigator, and each mentor was approved by the relevant chairperson and by the relevant

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[1]Brooklyn College's Core Curriculum, instituted in 1981, is a sequence of ten specially designed liberal arts and science courses which every undergraduate must complete.

course instructor. Suggestions came from administrators, instructors, counsellors, study of the SEEK transcripts, and from students. The mentors were all to be conscientious, articulate SEEK and/or minority students who had recently completed the course in question with a grade of A. The six selected were all black females. Their primary responsibilities were to encourage the participation of their potential mentees and to be available as role models and homework helpers for approximately five hours per week. To perform these duties most ably, they were required to attend class with the students at least once a week. The pay was as College Assistants. They participated in a few brief training sessions and kept full logs of their work, thereby providing some very useful data for the project, including the effects of mentoring on students and on mentors. The shape of the training sessions was drawn not only from my own experience but also from Bruffee (1965, 1985), Reigstad and McAndrew (1984), Olson (1984), Gonzalez-Marti (1983), and Goldsby (1981). Handouts were drawn also from Nieves (1984) and this author.

The following data regarding students participating in the project were specified for collection from the students: start-of-course and end-of-course scores on the Brown/Holtzman Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes, Form 6 (1967)[1] and on the Daly/Miller Checklist on Student Writing Apprehension (1975);[2] end-of-course answers to questionnaire on needs perception; end-of-course answers

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[1]The Brown/Holtzman Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes is a 100 item questionnaire yielding four component subscores ranging from 0 to 50. It was normed on college freshmen from 9 colleges in 1965. The subscores with their means and their meanings are as follows: Delay-Avoidance (X=25), "promptness in completing academic assignments, lack of procrastination, and freedom from wasteful delay and distraction"; Work Methods (X=25.1), "use of effective study procedures, efficiency in doing academic assignments, and how-to-study skills"; Teacher Approval (X=32.7), "opinions of teachers and their classroom behavior and methods"; Education Acceptance (X=31.4) "approval of educational objectives, practices, and requirements."

[2]The Daly/Miller Checklist on Student Writing Apprehension is a 36 item questionnaire whose score ranges from a low of 26 to a high (desireable) of 130 with a mean of 79.28 for college students enrolled in basic writing.

to questionnaire on mentors' meeting of needs (experimental students only). The following data regarding students participating in the project were specified for collection from the course instructors: attendance, final exam scores, course grades, start-of-course and end-of-course writing samples. In addition, the instructors were to be queried on the nature and value of the project.

It should be stated at the outset that all of the mentors, the overwhelming majority of the participating experimental students, and the instructors have supported the project with great enthusiasm, as have a variety of other persons throughout the college. This accounts in large measure for the decision to carry out a more extensive project than was originally proposed.

Outcomes

Some preliminary findings have been computed for presentation here. Computations are based only on those students for whom full sets of both pre and post questionnaires have been collected and tabulated to date.

Preliminary findings from the Brown/Holtzman suggest that there is a slight deterioration in the stated study habits and attitudes of struggling SEEK students from the start to the end of a difficult course regardless of whether they are experimental or control students. Further, there is some suggestion that mentoring had a small effect in stemming this deterioration. Preliminary findings from the Daly/Miller Checklist on Student Writing Apprehension suggest a small improvement in attitudes toward writing for the experimental students.

The data from the questionnaire on students' perceptions of help needed with the course have been computed for 10 experimental students in Core 1 and 27 experimental students in Developmental Writing. The means for amount of help needed with the course in general are 2.1 and 2.4 respectively, based on a rating

of 1 for little need, 2 for some need, and 3 for great need. For both courses, interestingly, the areas of greatest identified need were outlining and writing papers, and using primary and secondary sources for papers; these two were followed closely and respectively in both classes by reviewing for exams and participating in class discussions.

This information on the students' perceptions of specific needs, incidentally, seems roughly to corroborate that on faculty perceptions (gathered in preparation for this project by the investigator), except that faculty additionally emphasized understanding texts and taking notes and gave far less importance to class participation.

Regarding the experimental students' perceptions of their benefits from the mentoring, 95% say they would recommend mentoring to others, and 93% say they would like to see their mentor after the course ends. Means from this questionnaire are based on an N of 21 experimental Writing students and 7 experimental Core 1 students, with possible scores ranging from 1 for little help, 2 for some help, to 3 for great help. Regarding improvement seen from mentoring in general, the mean for Core 1 is 2.14 and for Writing 2.67. When asked about help obtained from mentoring in 10 specific ways, the Core students gave a perfect 3 to holding tutoring sessions, 2.86 to clarifying understanding of writing assignments, 2.71 to guiding revision of papers, and 2.57 to reviewing assigned readings (mean scores on the other 6 items range from 1.67 for providing supplementary homework to 2.29 for leading exam reviews). For these same questions, the Writing students (all of them freshmen) gave the highest mean score (2.83) to having the mentor in class as a role model. Other specifics with mean scores of 2.5 or above for the Writing students were the following: encouraging class participation; clarifying understanding of writing assignments; providing supplementary homework; leading exam reviews; and reviewing assigned readings.

No attempt will be made here to present the responses to the open-ended questions with the exception of noting that they were extremely positive and that a dominant recurring theme was the students' perception that "somebody cares."

An important ancillary outcome of mentoring is that it tends to benefit the mentor (Busch, 1985). All 6 mentors plan careers in a helping profession and say that their work in this project has influenced them. As they are now in their second or third year at the college, it appears that the project can be of some import for their futures. In keeping with what the research literature on peer tutors shows, namely that the tutors learn the material they teach better than comparable students who are recipients of professional teaching (Jackson and VanZoost, 1974, cited in Fremouw and Feindler, 1978), these mentors unanimously report improving their own skills of studentship through helping others develop the same skills.

Current work is the continuation of gathering and analyzing the project data to explore whether mentoring has had a positive effect on the college careers of the experimental students. Also under study are the effects on the mentors. Additional data on student attitude and performance from the subsequent semester will be used to help assess the impact of mentoring on attrition.

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APPENDIX

WHAT IS A STUDENT MENTOR?

In this project the use of the term mentor, rather than peer tutor or some other, was an important choice. The idea of initiating new members of a community or organization in the most effective way has been studied considerably for non-academic settings, particularly in business. There one widely accepted policy is to assign each new member a mentor of proven ability in the specific job and with good "people" skills; if this is not done new members may choose their own unofficial mentors who are less than acceptable role models. The mentor's role is to introduce the novice to the surroundings, guide him or her in work, and generally serve as an advisor and intermediary between the organization and the new member. Making the human process a learning one makes the learning process a human one.

What is a student mentor? This question can best be answered through considering both what a student mentor is and is not. The mentor is not a co-instructor and has no role in determining the syllabus or providing regular instruction. Nor is the mentor a tutor, as the term is traditionally understood. The mentor is not a peer tutor in the sense of being a facilitator of collaborative consensus-oriented learning. Nor is the mentor an isolated tutor, i.e., a person who provides supplementary instruction separate in input and feedback from instructor and classwork. The student mentor differs from all of the above, playing a special role defined by background, attitude, and function. Background: The mentor has successfully completed the specific course to which he or she is assigned and possesses both familiarity with the course material and the requisite practical skills, including the ability to explain concepts and present his or her viewpoint in both speech and writing. The mentor also has fresh memories of the student view of assignments, etc. Attitude: The mentor should be student-oriented,

i.e., concerned with and eager for the success of all students. The mentor must also share the instructor's concern with professionalism. He or she must be committed to rigorous structured student work under the instructor's direction. Function: The mentor plays roles both in class and out. The advantages of the mentor's being regularly present in class include continuous familiarity with class lectures, discussions, and assignments, observation of student performance, opportunities for specific instructions for tutorial sessions, and impression on the students of a close association and mutual respect between instructor and mentor. Outside the classroom, the mentor's role includes the traditional aspects of tutoring but is enriched by the close connection to coursework and instructor. The instructor can easily consult with the mentor and target specific students or groups of students in need of supplementary homework, and can rely on the mentor to assign and check such work. Thus with no major increase in the instructor's responsibilities, supervised student "time on task" can be substantially increased.

The mentor's affective impact both in and out of class is often great; it draws on the students' natural respect for one who has already done well in a course they are taking, a constant reminder that their own goal is attainable. The mentor is a model of seriousness of purpose and proficiency in study skills and communications skills. He or she is also a model for open communication with the instructor and yet retains the ability to "speak the same language" as the students, who may be frustrated, demotivated, or beset by personal problems. Rather than merely being an intermediary between student and instructor, the mentor is a mediator between student and the goal of success in the course.